

YHWH's Agents of Doom

The Punishing Function of Angels in Post-Exilic Writings of the Old Testament

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In the Old Testament there are men and messengers who are not ordinary humans, but belong to the divine sphere. The texts either indicate this by attributing them to God (מלאך יהוה), or imply it because the actions these characters perform are so powerful that human beings could not accomplish them. Even though the technical term מלאך is not always used early reception history of these writings understood them as divine beings, as “angels”. Often they are benevolent, but they may also cause harm and execute punishment at YHWH's command.

1. Single Destroyers in Narrative Tradition

The most prominent punishing agent probably first coming to mind is the one causing the death of the firstborn in Egypt on the eve of the exodus in the context of the first Passover. In the now canonical text of Exod the death of the firstborn forms the climactic and final one within the series of ten plagues. A closer look at Exod 12 shows that for the most part it is YHWH himself who strikes down the firstborn¹. There is only one sentence saying that God will not allow the destroyer (משחית) enter the Israelites' houses to strike (נגף, Exod 12:23). Hence, Exod 12 creates an ambivalent impression: It is God himself who kills the firstborn; at the same time there seems to be a killing agent who is not YHWH himself, though he is acting at divine command².

1 Especially in Exod 12:29 where God himself is reported to perform the action of striking (נכה); cf. 12: 12 (again with נכה as verb) and 13b (נכה, but note as well the noun משחית). נכה and שחית/משחית obviously form a terminology of judgement.

2 In a passage remembering the plagues God sent to the Egyptians Ps 78 mentions a group of destroying angels (משלחת מלאכי רעים) “group of messengers/ angels causing evil/ disaster”, Ps 78:49.

Things are a bit clearer in 2Kgs 19 (// Isa 37): After Isaiah has pronounced an oracle promising that YHWH will make the besieging Assyrian army withdraw and so save Jerusalem, the narrator informs us that that very night YHWH's angel set out and struck (נכה) 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp (19:35), so that in the morning they all were dead bodies³. This made Senacherib withdraw to Nineveh. Here God acts through an agent who is explicitly called מלאך יהוה ("messenger / angel of YHWH")⁴. Again, the verb נכה describes the harming activity causing the death of a great number of non-Israelite persons for the benefit of YHWH's own people.

We find another comparable instance in the narrative about the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19). Again, it is a narrator who introduces two characters, whom Lot receives as guests in his home, and explicitly calls them "messengers" / "angels" (Gen 19:1). Within the episode about the Sodomites' attempt to seize Lot's two guests they just occur as "men" (האנשים, 19:5,7,10)⁵. These "men" (19:12) advise Lot to leave his home because they will destroy (שחת) the place as God sent them to do. At the same time the two "angels" (המלאכים, 19:15) function as guardians of Lot and his family as they urge them to leave and even seize and lead them out of the town (19:16). According to 19:24a, however, it is God himself who effects destruction by raining sulphur and fire on Sodom and Gomorrha. Again, we get a similar ambivalent impression as in Exod 12⁶.

In Gen 19 there are characteristics typical of the way God's agents come into narrative texts: They are called "men", that is, their outward appearance is human. On the other hand the narrator designates them as "messengers" / "angels". Their abilities, actions, and functions demonstrate that they have supernatural powers and act on God's behalf. In the canonical text the difference between God and his agents is somehow blurred as the reader feels that God is acting both directly and at the same time indirectly by sending his agents. This ambivalence is a result of the redactional development of the passages. The angel striking a great number of persons may preserve more ancient memories of a belief that deities or demons are responsible for (contagious) disease

3 2Chr 32:21 gives more activity to God: he sent (שלח) the מלאך and effaces (חיד) the soldiers.

4 Cf. the reference to the event in Sira 48:21 (24) ascribing destruction in the Assyrian camp to God himself and his angel.

5 This episode is regarded as a later addition modelled on Judg 19:22ff., cf. Seebass, Genesis 150. The two "men" strike the Sodomites blind to prevent further aggression. This action may be understood also as a kind of punishment; at the same time it has a symbolic quality.

6 For an outline of the genesis of Gen 19 cf. Ruppert, Genesis 403-409.

or unexpected wholesale slaughter⁷. These deities or demons were deprived of their positions and became YHWH's inferior⁸. Thus the two angels visiting Lot also add an archaic, even fairy-tale ring to the story. But at the same time this mythological element may be regarded as a challenge to a monotheistic concept. Therefore, part of the text (probably the basic layer) evokes the impression that God himself and he alone carries out the striking⁹. So presumably the idea of divine agents (re-)entered the texts only when monotheism was firmly established (so that there appeared to be no danger of polytheistic misunderstanding) and when YHWH gradually came to be considered a more and more transcendent deity. By introducing destroying intermediary agents God himself, though he is commanding them, is no killer, his hands are not steeped in blood so to speak. It seems as though later generations of narrators and redactors felt reluctant to make YHWH himself an executor of bloodshed and death. Therefore, they re-activated mythological material which had been preserved both in Israel's environment and in popular religious culture.

So far the agents' activity was directed against foreign people. In 2Sam 24 (cf. 1Chr 21¹⁰) God punishes his own people by sending pestilence to Jerusalem (בִּירוּשָׁלַם דְּבַר יְהוָה וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה, 2Sam 24:15a). The next verse seems to take it for granted that YHWH's messenger / angel brings about the lethal pestilence, an activity intended to destroy (לְשַׁחֲתָהּ) the city. However, when the angel starts to infect/touch the people, God relents and tells the destroying angel to stop (24:16). This rather late text explicitly identifies YHWH's angel as the one bringing about destruction. He is a being not identical with YHWH, but at God's command. Again, the angel is visible to human beings – David perceives him, a sight that rouses him to repentance (24:17).

All passages mentioned above have one central feature in common: they are narrative texts claiming to give an account of historical events which are, nevertheless, interpreted theologically. This theological perspective includes God as an agent in the course of events. In all four passages it is more or less obvious that YHWH has beings at his disposal who act at his command and effect destruction of a great number of people. The agent is mentioned briefly, as in passing. It is a single agent (only in Gen 19 there are two) identified by the narrator as מַלְאָךְ, that is messenger. He is shown operating within the human sphere, and his

7 Cf. the apotropaic rite of spreading blood on the door frames of the Israelites' houses in Egypt.

8 Cf. Duhm, Geister 14f.

9 For a presumable mythological background of Gen 19 cf. Keel, Sodom.

10 For a detailed analysis see the article by P. Beentjes in this volume.

activity aims at destruction (שִׁחַת hif.). The activity itself is described as “striking” (נָכָה). Apart from 2Sam 24 there is ambiguity because destruction is attributed both to God himself and to his agent at the same time. The destroying messenger’s relationship to God is clearly a subordinate one. How these divine agents came into being and where they reside remains obscure¹¹. In any case God sends these agents to demonstrate his power by harming the Egyptians because Pharaoh remains unreasonable and hard-hearted and will not let the Israelites go (Exod); to defend Jerusalem against the Assyrian siege and imminent conquest (2Kgs 19), and to punish sin (Gen 19 and 2Sam 24).

2. A Group of Seven Punishing Agents (Ezek 9:1-10:7*)

A more prominent appearance of God’s punishing agents is found within the second vision in the Book of Ezekiel (Ezek 8-11). The dating in Ezek 8:1 marks the beginning of a new section in the book. While Ezekiel is in his house in Babylonia with the elders sitting before him (8:1, cf. 14:1; 20:1) he has an extraordinary experience: God’s hand carries him away in rapture (8:1b)¹² and Ezekiel is subjected to a visionary experience (“And I beheld, look, there was ...”, 8:2). First thing he sees is a being somewhat like a fiery appearance reminding of the human-shaped person¹³ he saw sitting on the heavenly throne in chapter 1 (1:26bβ,27a) whose loins were identifiable whereas the upper part of the person was not to be seen because of extreme light. This apparition is clearly meant to be God himself¹⁴. Most critics agree that the phrase is redactional, intended to connect the visions in Ezek 1-3 and 8-11. This man is only mentioned in the introductory line. Next, the humanoid stretches out something in the form of a hand and takes Ezekiel away

11 Compare however Isa 54:16 where God says: “I have created the destroyer (מְשַׁחֵת) in order to ruin (לְהַבֵּל)”. So the agent is clearly God’s creature.

12 The introductory phrase also found in 1:3b; 3:22a; 37:1; 40:1b connects Ezekiel’s visionary experiences.

13 It is widely agreed that MT’s כְּמֵרֵאשִׁית is to be read כְּמֵרֵאשִׁית (cf. ἀνδρὸς in LXX). It is copied from 1:27 where you find the expression twice.

14 Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 210, thinks that this is a supernatural figure functioning as an angelic messenger. For him there is a mingling of acting subjects (man, spirit, God). Fuhs, *Ezekiel* 49, says that the writers quite consciously left it indeterminate who carries Ezekiel away. Allen, *Ezekiel* 138, argues that there is no room for an angelic interpreter in Ezek 8-11, but that we find a pattern of references to chap. 1. Especially the (secondary) v.4 now helps to blur the contours within the divine sphere. 8:4 refers to God’s glory and retrospectively creates the impression that the humanoid figure in 8:2 might be a different thing.

by a mop of his hair (8:3a). The next moment it is the spirit¹⁵ lifting him between earth and heaven and taking him in divine visions to Jerusalem, namely to the northern entrance of the city (8:3b). With its mixture of phrases and concepts which are found elsewhere in the book¹⁶, Ezek 8:1-3 introduce the visionary section 8:4-11:23. 11:24 (and 25) corresponds to 8:1-3, building a frame for the collection of visions. Strictly speaking, so far an "angel" is not to be found, as in the first part of the vision God himself is talking to Ezekiel and taking him on a guided tour¹⁷ through the Jerusalem Temple.

Ezek 8:3bβ,5-17 describe a series of four scenarios of aberrant worshipping Ezekiel witnesses during his spiritual journey. All four scenes follow the same pattern: The divine power takes him to the setting which Ezekiel, the first-person narrator, describes. God's voice addresses him, sometimes giving orders ("lift up your eyes", 8:5; "go in and see", 8:9), always asking "Mortal, have you seen / do you see this" (8:6,12,15,17) and announcing at the end of the first three scenes "you will see still greater abominations than these" (8:6,13,15).

As the book's basic fiction has it, Ezekiel lives among the exiles in Babylonia. That is why he witnesses in a rapture the aberrant cultic practices in the Jerusalem Temple. Otherwise he might have walked about the town and the Temple area on his own and observed the sinful doings of Jerusalemite people. Ezek 8 visualizes the people's sins and functions corresponding to an indictment within a prophetic oracle. Compared to the Deuteronomistic school's stereotyped criticism of aberrant worship, Ezek 8 offers a detailed specific description of offences committed right in the one and only legitimate sanctuary. The four scenes taken together indicate an entirety of sin. God's final comment on each scene indicates their climactic arrangement. His last comment (8:18) threatens and announces judgement without mercy¹⁸. He does not say, however, how he is going to execute it. At least part of the collection of oracles following later on in Ezek 12-24 might provide an answer in a metaphorical way of speaking. Another answer is implied in God's glory leaving the Temple (11:23, prepared by the glory's presence mentioned in 8:4).

Ezek 9:1-10:7 offers the most impressive illustration of how judgement will be executed on Jerusalem. Ezekiel's visionary experience is

15 Cf. Ezek 3:12,14; 11:1,5,24; 37:1a.

16 Vogt, *Untersuchungen* 39-41, takes Ezek 8:2-3a as an addition, Pohlmann, *Prophet* 138, considers 8:1-3bα as an addition.

17 בוא hif., here meaning either "he brought me", or "he made me come".

18 The combination of חורס and חמל is also found in Ezek 5:11; 7:4,9; 9:5,10. These actions are always prompted by abominations.

continued, but the objects he perceives belong to another level as he gains insight into the divine sphere including its celestial residents. Ezekiel turns from wanderer and witness to mere witness. It seems plausible that the vision of abominations committed in the Temple was expanded by the vision of judgement¹⁹.

Yelling with a loud voice God calls out. He is either giving a statement on ("They have come near the [punishments] punishers of the city") or an order to ("Come near, you [punishments] punishers of the city")²⁰ a group *sc.* of persons, each one carrying his instrument of destruction (מִשְׁחָת) in his hand. Ezekiel describes what is happening next (הִנֵּה, 9:2): God's calling prompts the appearance of six men. Ezekiel observes them approaching from the north. Each has an instrument for destroying (נִכְרֵץ "dashing to pieces", 9:2aα) in his hand. There is also one man among them wearing linen garment and a writing kit at his side (9:2aβ) so that the total number of men makes up seven²¹. Again this number symbolizes an entity, this time a heavenly one. At the same time there may be a tradition of seven deities – for example seven Babylonian planetary deities – in the background²². The linen-clad man with the writing kit is distinguished as a priestly figure and as a scribe at the same time. Accordingly, God will send him on two different commissions. The six executioners are sent into the city to strike (נָכַח), i.e. to kill. Their activity will be performed without mercy (9:5a), reflecting God's attitude, namely neither to show compassion nor to feel pity (9:5b cf. 8:18). 9:6a explicates the relentlessness of judgement: They are to kill old and young, women and children without any exception. This command to execute people indifferently and not sparing anyone is perfectly in line with God's threat in 8:18.

Now, God's first order to the linen-clothed man is inconsistent with total judgement, as he tells him to use his writing instrument in order to mark with a protective sign the foreheads of those who criticize aberrant cultic practices in town²³. This scribal function of the linen-

19 Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* 205-206, offers a reconstruction of a basic text he finds in chapters 8 and 9; Becker, *Ez* 8-11 143, thinks that chapters 8 and 9 may not be separated. Later commentators tend to regard Ezek 9 as a later addition: Cf. Pohlmann, *Prophet* 142; Block, *Book* 302, says that the editor worked hard to integrate chapter 9. Behrens, *Visionsschilderungen* 225, would not expect a sequel after the threat in 8:18.

20 קָרְבוֹ may be understood in both ways; cf. the discussion by Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* 195-196 and Vogt, *Untersuchungen* 46-47.

21 This seems preferable to considering the linen-clad man as one of the six. The remark that the glory starts to move to the threshold of the Temple (9:3a) prompted the repetition of the seventh man's description.

22 Cf. Gunkel, *Schreiberengel* 295.

23 נ was written as x or +. For a protective sign cf. Gen 4:15.

clothed man seems to be a later modification allowing for a (small) part of Jerusalem's population who have not committed abominations and thus will be spared²⁴. This feature takes into account the problem that there may be some righteous people in Jerusalem; on these retribution would not be inflicted. This means that the writing kit at the man's side (9:3bβ), the word אֶחָדִי (9:5aβ), and the order to the executioners not to touch those bearing the mark (9:6aα²) are secondary material within this passage, as well as 9:11 reintroducing the linen-clothed man for receiving his second, that is his original commission.

So in the basic version God sends the six executioners to Jerusalem to inflict punishment on her population relentlessly (9:6aβ). They are to start killing people right in the heart of the city, namely in the Temple (9:6b)²⁵. Quite consciously God has them defile the sanctuary with the dead bodies of those who have profaned the Temple by cultic aberration (9:7a). This idea reminds of King Josiah defiling the altar at Bethel with the bones of buried people (2Kgs 23:16), thus fulfilling an oracle of old (1Kgs 13:2). Here, defilement even concerns YHWH's only legitimate sanctuary in Jerusalem – not a shrine considered illegitimate from a Deuteronomist's point of view.

When the executioners have gone to perform their commission, Ezekiel reacts to what he has seen and heard. He falls to the ground and pleads for the people who are the remnant of Israel (9:8)²⁶. Ezekiel's intercession recalls Amos' prayers (Am 7:1-3,4-6); whereas Amos' pleading for mercy makes God abandon his intention to punish Israel, YHWH does not yield to Ezekiel's plea, but confirms his plan to inflict punishment for Jerusalem's exceeding guilt (9:9) and his determination not to feel pity (9:10, resuming 8:18; 9:5). Jerusalem is doomed to the coming catastrophe irrevocably.

The basic text of the vision of judgement is continued in 10:2,6,7²⁷. Now the man clothed in linen receives his primary order, namely to take burning coals from the wheelwork of the glory's throne and to

24 For the problem cf. Ezek 14:12-23; Gen 18:23-33; and Ezek 18 for the problem of individual retribution.

25 Either the 25 men mentioned in 8:16 offering the climactic cultic offence, or the 70 elders in 8:11 are to be slain first.

26 This prayer again proves that God's first order to the linen-clad must be a later addition as Ezekiel talks about all that remains of Israel. Besides it is quite uncommon within the Book of Ezekiel that the prophet himself addresses God (cf. 11:13 and 21:5 [MT]); so Ezekiel's prayer appears to be secondary material within the book. It is clearly intended to allude to Amos' intercession and thereby to make the reader see an increase in God's relentlessness – which is due to the increase in the people's crime.

27 For the secondary character of 10:1 and 10:3-5 cf. Hölscher, Hesekeiel 78; Vogt, Untersuchungen 50-52; Hossfeld, Tempelvision 161-162.

scatter them over the city (10:2) in order to burn Jerusalem. 10:6b²⁸, 7 describe how the man is supplied with coals by a cherub – this recalls the seraph's action in Isa 6:6 – and leaves the Temple carrying them in his hands. It goes without saying that he will keep on performing God's commission and set Jerusalem on fire. The fact that he closely approaches the altar viz. the wheelwork of the glory's throne explains why he is characterized as a priestly figure through his linen garment²⁹. His primary function here is that of a punishing agent. Together, he and the other six men bring about Jerusalem's doom. As there were people who survived the conquest of Jerusalem, an additional afterthought provides the linen-clad man with a protective role. Since priests and scribes were often identical persons it was easy to give him also a scribal attribute and function.

Although the text refers to all seven as "men", it is obvious for the reader that they belong to the celestial sphere. They are at God's command and he employs them to execute judgement on Jerusalem. YHWH sends them, therefore they may be called "angels" from a later point of view. God delegates power to this squad of angels to effect mass destruction. In Ezekiel's vision they are a visualization of the way God accomplishes judgement, namely by supernatural powers. The readers know that actually it was the Babylonian army that served as God's instrument of destruction. Being aware of this historical level, Ezekiel's vision describes the corresponding supernatural proceedings that cause the catastrophe. He has a glimpse behind the scenes so to speak. In this sense Ezek 9:1-10:7* may be called apocalyptic.

As compared to the single destroyers in the historical narratives several aspects are striking considering Ezek 9:1-10:7. There is a group of seven agents of doom; they enter upon different tasks – the striking (נכה) reminding of the single destroyer's activity, the scattering of fire recalling the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Apart from this Ezekiel's vision of judgement abounds in allusions to other Biblical texts, a feature characteristic of scribal activity. It is distinctive of the Book of Ezekiel that its authors pick up phrases, metaphors, or concepts from preceding literature and make them more elaborate. Hence, it seems likely that Jer 22:7 plays an important part in the development of this vision of God's punishing agents³⁰. Jer 22:7 says: "I have consecrated against you destroyers, each with his instrument, and they will

28 10:6a repeats God's command because of the insertion of 10:3-5.

29 For priestly garments made of linen cf. Exod 28:42; Lev 6:2; later it is a characteristic of angelic figures cf. Dan 10:5; 12:6-7.

30 Fuhs, *Ezechiel* 54, says that the idea of the destroyer was taken from Jer 22:7 and extended to seven beings because of Babylonian influence.

cut down your choicest cedars and cause them to fall into the fire." This poetic verse is part of an oracle of doom directed against the Judean royal dynasty. Jerusalem will be made a desert (22:6). YHWH has already assigned destroyers; they will point their destroying activity at the buildings made of cedar wood, that is, the Temple and the King's palace, which represent the heart of the city. The destroyers will ruin and burn them. It goes without saying that this will affect the inhabitants as well. In Jeremiah, the "destroyers" refer to the Babylonian army. In Ezek 9, though, they are transferred to the celestial sphere, bearing in mind the idea of a single destroyer and the Ancient Near Eastern traditions of seven deities. With this glimpse into the divine sphere Ezekiel's vision illustrates that doomsday is irrevocably imminent for Jerusalem. God has already activated his agents, and they will certainly execute his commission, as these angels are God's faithful servants³¹.

3. The Satan Pleading for Doom (Job and Zech)

There are two further glimpses into the celestial sphere where agents of God appear who at least intend to condemn a person and to abandon him to doom. In both instances "the satan" takes the function of this agent of doom, namely in the two scenes in heaven included in the prologue of the Book of Job (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7)³², and in Zech 3:1-2.

Within the narrative about Job, the "sons of God" assemble twice before YHWH (1:6; 2:1)³³; the only prominent figure among these is "the satan", the accuser or opponent (הַשָּׂטָן)³⁴. Obviously, the satan is accustomed to leave the heavenly sphere and to travel through the world, observing people. YHWH is especially concerned about Job, his servant, because he considers him a paramount example of piety, righteousness and fear of God. The accuser challenges God's view of Job. He states that Job is not disinterested, that he will only be pious and righteous as

31 Note: In the narrative of Susannah appended to the Book of Daniel, Daniel functions as judge and declares the two elders guilty. He leaves their punishment to God's angel (Dan 13:55,59).

32 The problem whether the two scenes in heaven originally formed an integral part of the narrative (cf. e.g. Spieckermann, *Satanisierung* 433 annotation 5), or were inserted later (cf. e.g. Berges, *Ijobrahmen* 232-234) may be neglected for our present purpose.

33 This assembly, the "divine counsel" is a concept to be found in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, cf. Parker, *Sons*.

34 Since in Hebrew it is connected with the definite article, the term does not yet function as a proper name as it did later on in reception history.

long as he may enjoy the gifts of God, namely his rich possessions and his prospering family. God enters into the contest and permits the accuser to deprive Job of everything he calls his own – except his life. At the end of this dialogue the narrator remarks that the accuser left the heavenly sphere (1:12b). Therefore it is clear for the reader that the satan is the one who causes Job's loss of prosperity. The satan however does not succeed in making Job renounce his faith in God. Thus he asks YHWH for a second chance – this time he plans an attack on Job's health. Again God agrees under the condition that the satan spare Job's life. This time the narrator explicitly says that the satan struck (נכה) Job with severe disease (2:7). If God had not forbidden to touch Job's life, Job would certainly have died on this occasion.

So in two steps the satan acts as a destroyer of blessings God had given to Job. YHWH's restrictive permission indicates that the satan would have the power to kill Job. Especially in the second episode the satan reminds of the destroyers we met above. As the accuser enters the human world in order to do harm he also resembles the group of seven angels in Ezekiel. As YHWH keeps the prerogative of life he is clearly the Satan's superior. But in contrast to the faithful servant angels we met before, he is YHWH's antagonist furnished with power. The satan not only acts as a destroyer, he also pleads that even a righteous man like Job is in fact doomed because his piety is not disinterested. The satan is no doubt a celestial being and an agent of God – in this sense he may be called an angel. But he appears much more independent than the punishing angels in the Pentateuch, the historical writings and in Ezek, as he is directly conversing with YHWH and even arguing a point of his own. Because of his comparatively great independence and even though he is not God's equal the satan is also considered a challenge to the monotheistic concept. That is why interpreters of the heavenly scenes have described the satan as the dark side or as an aspect of the complex personality of the one and only God³⁵. But again a biblical writer has not God himself touch man and cause him harm; instead the narrator has an intermediary do this³⁶.

The narrator discloses the heavenly sphere only to the reader³⁷. To Job, the protagonist of the story, it seems as if God himself has acted

35 Cf. Clines, Job 22: "we can suggest that the 'sons of God' or 'angels' are manifestations of the divine personality, the means of execution of divine decisions, the source of divine acquisition of knowledge of human affairs. That they are *only* personifications of divine attributes, powers, or dispositions is beyond the competence of any human to tell; but they are that at least." Cf. also Spieckermann, Satanisierung.

36 In the course of reception history this prompted the idea that the satan is an evil power which he is not in the OT (cf. Pagels, Origin, 39-42).

37 Schmid, Hiobproblem 21.

upon him and deprived him of his prosperity (cf. 1:21aβ; 2:10aβ). Therefore, the two scenes in heaven offer to the reader still another interpretation as to why Job has to suffer so much without any apparent reason.

The satan³⁸ in Zech 3:1-2³⁹ resembles the one in Job 1-2 in that he obviously pleads to condemn Joshua the high priest and to expose him to doom. Actually he objects to Joshua's suitability for the office of the high priest. As we learn later on Joshua is wearing filthy clothing (3:3) which symbolizes his impure and sinful state which might justify his rejection. Here, the satan seems to be opposed by an angel of YHWH (instead of YHWH himself)⁴⁰ who acts as God's representative and effects forgiveness of Joshua's sin. Even if the angel dominates the satan, one has a feeling that the two opponents are basically on the same level as two angels arguing different causes. The satan is only mentioned briefly in this context. As Zech 3 is part of the series of Zechariah's visions, it recalls Ezekiel witnessing a scene in heaven while he is in a state of rapture.

The narrators or authors of the texts we have examined give their readers an opportunity to witness the activities of divine agents who have the power to destroy. They do this at YHWH's command, or with his permission, and yet, the reader gets the impression that God himself does not execute destruction. He leaves this to his agents. These divine punishing "angels" – as they were or came to be called – were introduced in order to preserve the supreme Deity's transcendent and holy state and / or to include the aspect of considering doom in God's personality. They are mythical elements rising within firmly established monotheism. At the same time they may be a challenge to the monotheistic creed as well. Anyway, they help to pave the way for a concept of punishing agents in hell who are at Satan's command.

38 Again, not a proper name, cf. the definite article in Hebrew.

39 The discussion whether Zech 3 is an original, integral part of the series of visions (cf. Beuken, *Sacharja* 282-283) or an insertion (cf. Jeremias, *Nachtgesichte* 201-203; more recently Behrens, *Visionsschilderungen* 301-305) need not be taken into consideration for our present purpose.

40 Though MT reads יהוה in the beginning of 3:2, this is difficult because of the following speech which refers to YHWH in the third person. If MT was not corrupt, it would offer still another example of blurring the difference between God and his agent.

Abstract

In narrative writings of the OT (Exod 12, 2Kgs19, Gen 19, 2Sam 24) a single punishing agent (only in Gen 19 there are two of them operating more in detail) occurs who kills a great number of people. At least in Exod 12 and Gen 19 the texts also say that God himself effects destruction. This ambiguity seems to mirror the genesis of these stories.

Within Ezekiel's second vision (Ezek 8-11) the prophet takes a glimpse behind the celestial scenes: He witnesses how God reacts to the cultic aberrations in the Jerusalem Temple. God calls a group of seven men, celestial personifications of the Babylonian destroyers mentioned in Jer 22:7. God orders six of them to kill the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the seventh is originally commissioned to set the city on fire. A later afterthought also made him mark the innocent within the city with a protective sign.

"The satan" in Job 1-2 and in Zech 3:1-2 pleads that Job viz. Joshua are in fact doomed to judgement because they are potential viz. actual sinners.

Throughout these texts the readers get the impression that God does not execute destruction / doom himself.

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